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Death, phoniness and relationships between children and parental figures in YA fiction: *The Book Thief*, *The Fault In our Stars*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

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Death, phoniness and relationships between children and parental figures in YA fiction: *The Book Thief*, *The Fault In our Stars*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*

This essay discusses the relationships between parents and children in young adult fiction, and how factors such as death and phoniness affect them. More concretely, it will analyse the representation of those factors in three very successful young adult fiction texts. The first book that will be discussed is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). We are going to compare the relationship between Holden Caulfield and his parents with the one that Hazel Grace has with her parents in John Green's worldwide bestseller *The Fault In Our Stars* (2014). The third book under discussion will be Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005). The difference between the first two novels and Zusak's work, is that the action in Markus Zusak's novel takes place in times of war, which will change the way in which the parental relationships work. Due to the lack of literature on the young adult relationships with their parental figures in literature and the great differences that the families in the three novels present, the comparison of the parent/child relationship will be a complicated task. Nevertheless, we will be able to draw some conclusions regarding those matters. We will be able to recognize the positive and negative effects of the actions of the parental figures and the circumstances in which the young adults of the three novels are forced to live. We will be able to see how illness, death and the way the parental figures address those matters will affect the young adults' character and behaviour.

In order to understand the characteristics of these family relationships, we should be well aware of the circumstances surrounding the three families and how different they are. That way we can analyse in more depth the behaviours and personalities of the different young adults, and how their parental figures and circumstances shaped those. In the case of Holden Caulfield, the bond between him and his parents is not so strong. He spends most of the time in school, away from home. He is not really attached to the home environment and does not look forward to seeing his parents. The only family members he thinks about are his brother D.B and his little sister. He even avoids going back home after arriving to New York because he fears the reaction of his parents once they found out that he had been expelled. Throughout the novel, Holden describes or interacts with many of his family members and offers the reader a representation of the image he has of them. He is not very close with his father

and he considers him “phony” because of his profession. He is a lawyer, and in his son’s opinion that is a “phony” profession which is parallel to his personality. Holden gets to a point where he describes his parents as “touchy” and it appears like the only function they have in his eyes is to cause him fear, the fear of disappointing them.

The author and therefore the novel seem to give great importance to the theme of phoniness. The main character, Holden Caulfield, is constantly using the word “phony” to describe any attitude, person or situation that does not look authentic to him. “You ought to go to a boys' school sometime. Try it sometime,” I said. “It's full of phonies” (Salinger, 1951, pp.70), he says to Sally Hayes, a girl he fancies and tries to date, on one of their encounters. Another thing that he finds phony and hates is the magazines that they sell on trains. “I can usually even read one of those dumb stories in a magazine without puking. You know. One of those stories with a lot of phony, lean-jawed guys named David in it, and a lot of phony girls named Linda or Marcia that are always lighting all the goddam Davids’ pipes for them.” (Salinger, 1951, pp. 29) He criticizes the fake behaviour and people that keep up appearances rather than showing what they really feel or think. “He sees that the world belongs to adults, and it seems to him that they have filled it with phoniness”. (Salinger, 1951, pp. 46)

Even though he constantly points out the phoniness in others he is sometimes phony himself. For example, when he dates Sally Hayes knowing that “...Sally is a little annoying, and she likes to drop names” (Salinger, 1951, pp.40) He goes to the date to escape from his loneliness knowing that he is not going to enjoy it and that he doesn’t really like the girl that much. According to Laura Kring, Holden’s own fear of adulthood causes him to fixate on the preservation of youthful innocence, an ideal unattainable in the corrupt modern society. (Kring, 2013). Holden Caulfield’s idea to build a cabin out west and to leave civilization is an example that he is not ready to be a member of society, for it requires being *phony* sometimes. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel when he talks to his little sister in the amusement park and tells her that he is not going anywhere, we can see a step towards the growth he needs in order to live in the society surrounding him. Him seeing the adults as fake is one of the main reasons why the relationship he has with his parents is this distant. It explains the lack of attachment between them and why he is afraid of disappointing them.

On the contrary, in John Green’s *The Fault in our Stars*, the relationship between Hazel and her parents is really close. She is quite dependant on them and barely leaves their side. But that is not by far what makes their connection the way it is.

It's the fact that the girl has a terminal lung cancer what makes their relationship so different from any other child and parent relationship. Hazel's mother, Mrs Lancaster, is what people colloquially call a "helicopter mom". She is a stay-at-home mom who has to take care of all the needs of her daughter which is really complicated. She sometimes even forgets that she has a life and is entirely focused on making what's left of the life of her daughter a bit more pleasant, which is totally understandable, given the fact that her daughter has a terminal illness. Nevertheless, her daughter blames her for that. She doesn't want to be a burden to her family and encourages her mother to do something for herself instead of constantly being worried about her daughter. She perfectly understands the situation her mother is in and that it's not easy for her. "There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you're sixteen and that's having a kid who bites it from cancer", she thinks. (Green, 2014, pp. 11)

Finally, the relationship between Liesel Meminger and her adoptive parents in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* is way more complicated than the other two cases. The protagonist, Liesel Meminger, is a Jewish girl who lost her parents during the Second World War and is now living in an adoptive home with Hans Hubermann and his wife. The times in which they live and the situation Liesel comes from are really rough. Her biological parents die in hands of the German soldiers during the Second World War and she is forced to run away. She finds shelter and a family in the face of Hans Hubermann and his wife Rosa. At the beginning of the novel, Liesel is an angry child who has trust issues, which is understandable given the circumstances. Nevertheless, while the story moves on, she grows to be really loving to her friends and family, and develops a really strong moral code with the help of her foster father. A symbol that exemplifies her growth is the relationship she develops with books. According to the literature, as Liesel begins to learn how to read and write, and thus begins to gain power over books, her character also develops. She starts to mature emotionally and to be kinder and more understanding of those around her. This change is highlighted by her friendship with Max, a fugitive that the family hides in their basement. She becomes his caretaker and again we see this role symbolized by her relationship with books: She often reads to him, using books as a way to comfort him. On the other hand, when Frau Hermann, the wife of the mayor of the town they live in, stops using Rosa to do her washing and Liesel feels powerless to do anything, she begins stealing books from the Hermann

library as a way of reclaiming the power she feels was taken from her and her family (LitCharts, 2020)

The humanization/personification of Death is present in many occasions throughout the book. Critics such as Abigail Finkel (2018) argue that this is a tool that Zusak uses in order to introduce young adults into the challenging topics of death, suffering and the Holocaust. One of the examples of this personification is the attempt of Death to understand human beings. He tries to do that using a series of “descriptions” which aim to talk about what people experience during the narrative. For example, when Liesel wakes up the moment her brother dies, Death attempts to describe her reaction. He asks: “Why do they always shake them? Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud.” (Zusak, 2005, pp.21) According to Abigail Finkel (2018), at first Death is distant to the readers and describes the deaths as they didn’t matter. As those were an event in a series of similar events. A death that will soon be followed by many more. That was the case with Liesel’s brother’s death, for instance. Nevertheless, towards the end of the novel Death becomes closer to the characters and by the conclusion, Death’s descriptions of life’s end take into consideration the individuality of each person. I believe the presence of death makes the relationship between the parental figures and the child stronger: it is the inevitability of death that makes them realise how necessary the closeness between them is, and how in order to live a better life, they need each other.

The death she is surrounded by makes the growth and connection between them quite difficult. The setting of the story is the Second World War, which makes the presence of death obvious. Looking at human history, that is one of the periods where he had to work way harder. According to an article written by Oshiro in 2011, the author used the narrator to “frame the history of 1942, piling the deaths up in a way to express how exponentially deadly that period was”. Another interesting point is how the deaths of almost all the characters are revealed before they happen. That way the author makes the reader realise that the important part is not Death, after all, because you still want to keep reading so you can find out how the characters got to that moment. According to Robyn L. Moody (2013), by establishing a connection between death and humanity, Zusak forces readers to come to terms with the fact that they, too, play a role in the process of death. For that reason the narrator states that we should look for death in the

mirror, so we can realise that all of us are involved in death. The only function Death itself performs is to separate souls from bodies and carry them with it.

According to the existing literature, as quoted below, the gender of the teenager also plays a decisive role in the young adult fiction. The patterns of behaviour and the bond created between the parental figure and the child is not the same with girls as it is with boys. For instance, Frances A. Nadeau states that understanding the relationship between young adult girls and their mothers is essential because daughters bond with their mothers in a complex, interdependent association that often inhibits a daughter from establishing her own identity. By describing the daughter's quest for autonomy from different viewpoints, novels can offer possible solutions to the problems faced by adolescents (Nadeau, 1995). In the case of Hazel Grace, the intent of breaking away from her mother is born from the desire that her mother has a "normal" life, and not from the desire to discover her own identity. That, of course, is not really possible given the condition of the family. In contrast, although this initial bonding with the mother is true for both cases, for young adult boys it is normal to break away at an early age and try to identify more with their fathers (Nadeau, 1995). As it comes to Holden Caulfield, it is plain to see that due to his rebellious personality and the idea that everyone around him is "phony," he is not depending on the bond with his parents to shape his identity. On the contrary, he is discovering himself and the world without a lot of support from a parental figure. That is why he is often feeling confused and lonely. On the other hand, in the case of Liesel Meminger, we are witnessing a really peculiar case. Despite all the negative stimulus and events that happen in her life, she is growing to be way different. She is being brought up by her foster father as a loving and caring child with good bonds towards her family, and even towards her foster mother, who does not treat Liesel with the best attitude there is. This can prove that sometimes the circumstances of your life do not determine who you are, and that if you try to do your best and be the best version of yourself, you can achieve it no matter what.

Naturally, the behaviour and character presented by Hazel is not comparable to any other teenage girl. Although she presents negative attitudes towards her mother, they are not as severe as expected in a normal adolescent girl. Margaret Notar and Susan McDaniel state in an article from 1986, that the mother/daughter relationship is often conflictive, particularly during the daughter's adolescence, and it manifests many of the ambiguities and confusions about the social meanings of womanhood and motherhood. They add that adolescent daughters hold the most negative attitudes

towards their mothers and that the daughter's quest for autonomy, often manifested sexually, is not commended by the mothers (Notar & McDaniel, 1986, pp.11). As we can notice, this is not exactly the case with the family in *The Fault in Our Stars*. The daughter does not show a negative behaviour towards her mother and the sexual manifestation of their disagreement is not present. This kind of analysis, nevertheless, is not applicable to the young woman that we find in *The Book Thief*. The protagonist of Zusak's novel, Liesel Meminger, and her situation are far too extreme, plus the time and place they occur in are not ordinary. That is why, the study we used to try to explain Hazel's behaviour is not accurate in the case of Liesel, because the circumstances are way different.

To illustrate the difference between the relationship that Holden, Hazel and Liesel have with their parents, we can take a closer look into the way in which their personality is shaped through it. The comparison will be difficult since there is a huge difference between the circumstances of all three of our protagonists, although later on we might find out that the circumstances are not the most important part in this. Some authors of young adult fiction use the removal of the parental figure as a tool to give the child more freedom to face and solve problems on his or her own. This phenomenon is present in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The author uses the absence of the parents as a way to make the young boy go through a number of challenges and learn from them. That makes him grow and be more mature. This growth can be noticed by the reader at the end of the novel, when he no longer desires to be isolated out of society and realizes that he has to face it despite the fact that he risks to become "phony." On the other hand, the parental figures in Hazel's life are very present and constitute a great support for her. Nevertheless, she in occasions complains that she is not understood by her parents, but that is something normal given her condition. Anyone barely understands her, as she states in one of her group meetings: "Peter van Houten was the only person I'd ever come across who seemed to a) understand what it's like to be dying and b) not have died" (Green, 2014, pp. 13). As it comes to Liesel, she was deprived from her biological parents at the beginning of the novel. In her case, we witness a phenomenon similar to the circle of life. Firstly, she loses her biological parents and afterwards, she is adopted by her foster family and starts over. Of course, the two different families are not comparable and each one of them plays its role in her life, and therefore has different effects on her.

Whenever the protagonists of the novels feel like they are alone or poorly understood by their parental figures, they look for someone who could make up for that lack, someone who could understand them and make them feel like someone has their back. For Hazel Grace, that someone is usually Augustus Waters. He is in the same terminal condition that she is and he is also a teenager. He understands her situation more than anyone else. Therefore, whenever she feels she doesn't get enough support from her parents, she seeks refuge in him. As for Holden Caulfield, those figures are several. One of them is his younger sister from whom he seeks attention when he feels lonely. Another example of a figure he tries to make up the lack of a parental figure with is Mr. Antolini, a teacher he once had in school when he was younger. For Liesel Meminger that figure is mainly Hans Hubermann. He is the one that teaches her the greatest part of everything she knows, including reading and morals and he is the one that comforts her in the lonely nights in the basement.

To understand how the characters' identity and personality are shaped by the relationship with their parents, we would have to resort to psychology. According to psychologists like Holmes (2004: 1-19), here are four types of parent-child relationships. First of all, they mention the secure relationships, in which we can find the strongest type of attachment. The child feels he or she can depend on his parents or providers. He knows they will be there when he needs support and knows what to expect from them. Secondly, we can find the avoidant relationships, in which the child does not feel as secure in the parental environment. Avoidant children learn that depending on their parents won't get them the security they need and they learn to take care of themselves. The third category is the ambivalent relationships. In those the child may be insecurely attached to his parents. Children who are ambivalent have learned that sometimes their needs are met, and sometimes they are not. Last but not least is the disorganized relationship type, which according to Holmes "can be understood in terms of an approach-avoidance dilemma for infants for whom stressed or traumatized/traumatizing caregivers are simultaneously a source of threat and a secure base" (Holmes, 2004, pp.1-19). In other words, children who are raised in this kind of relationship do not know what to expect from their parents, which can grow into a serious trauma for the young adult and make him present irrational behaviour. This would explain Holden's random actions and his unexpected mood changes.

Another factor that could affect our protagonists is the one of bereavement. The loss of a parental figure could have huge consequences on the development of the child.

In the case of Liesel, it is an extreme situation because her biological parents are no longer with her. According to psychologists like McCarthy and Jessop, some studies of bereavement as a source of “risk” point to the possibility that bereavement in itself may have a significant impact on some individuals’ lives. These may or may not show up as negative “outcomes” in statistical studies. But the evidence is very complex and often contradictory, pointing to the relevance of cross-cutting issues, such as social class, gender, and individual and family differences; all of these may contribute to a level of protection or resilience for some young people. As with the qualitative research of the previously mentioned psychologists, these studies highlight the significance of the meaning of the bereavement to the individual. A variety of findings also raise the possibility of opposite effects occurring for different individuals – some may develop higher expectations for themselves, or find new strengths, while others may be overwhelmed and demotivated, reducing their expectations of life in various ways. Overall, this evidence points to the need for complex models of both causes of stress and of the resources young people can draw on, considered over a very long time span, in order to understand the significance of bereavement for the individual. (McCarthy & Jessop, 2005) The previously mentioned study explains why in the case of Liesel Meminger, the development finally ends up being positive. It depends on how you face the bereavement. According to the study, the death of a close relative can also have a positive effect on the child. It is not necessarily going to turn into a trauma. The outcomes of the bereavement can be turned to positive by the influences the young adult receives from his parental figures, and that way he or she can learn from the bereavement instead of just experiencing the negative effects it has. (McCarthy & Jessop, 2005)

In the case of *The Catcher in the Rye*, death is an issue not so present as in the other two books, but also has an impact on the characters. Holden Caulfield is also burdened with the death of a close relative like the other two protagonists, which is an important example of a common trait between the novels. His brother Allie dies from cancer and it seems to affect him a lot, given his young age when it happens. “and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage... I slept in the garage the night he died.. I’ll admit, but I hardly didn’t even know I was doing it, and you didn’t know Allie” (Salinger, 1951, pp.21). This extract shows us that Holden was angry with the world when his brother dies and that it left a permanent

trauma in his mind. Since then he has always had a negative idea of death. Nevertheless, he is rejecting the traditional idea of death and the ceremonies that usually come with it, like funerals. "I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something. Anything except sticking me in a goddamn cemetery. People coming and putting a bunch of flowers on your stomach on Sunday, and all that crap." (Salinger, 1951, pp.81) According to critics such as Reynolds, death is also a catalyst in Salinger's book. It was the determining factor that changed Holden's life and turned it upside down. He is telling us his story from a therapy ward, which points to the fact that the shadow of Allie has not left his psyche. He even considers suicide. "What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide" is what he says after the visit of two pimps in the hotel room (Salinger, 1951, pp. 113). Nevertheless, he loves his sister too much and doesn't want to add another brother's death to her troubles. He wants to protect Phoebe as well as all the other children of the world. That is why he imagines himself as the catcher in the rye, the person who saves children before they run off the edge of a cliff. He can't do that if he kills himself (Reynolds, 2018).

As it comes to the novel written by John Green, I argue that the perspective from which death is seen is much more metaphysical, far from being just the thought of physical death itself. The novel presents death as Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters are concerned with issues such as being forgotten after you die, the inevitability of death, etc. According to critics like Justin Rice, an author in the LitCharts platform, their personal concerns around death develop along different trajectories. Augustus is afraid of fading into oblivion after he dies, that his life will be meaningless, and nobody will remember him once he is gone. After bringing this fear up in the support group, Hazel responds by intellectualizing the fact of her impermanence. She states that everything will die, that there was a time before consciousness and there will be a time after it. Despite her intellectualization, however, she is still deeply conflicted around the issue of her own looming mortality. Unlike Augustus' self-centered fear of fading into oblivion, Hazel views her approaching death as an event that will severely damage those around her—like she is a grenade waiting to explode. (LitCharts, 2020). The three protagonists of the different novels see death and mortality from their own and unique point of view. Hazel and Holden have in common that they both do not want to burden their friends and family with their death. And that also has an effect on the relationships with their parental figures. The concern that they might be a burden for their relatives makes them distance themselves from their friends and family. As it comes to Liesel,

her situation is way different from the other two characters. She is surrounded by death all the time and during the majority of her life, so her perspective has nothing to do with the rest. The difference comes from the circumstances she is growing up in and the fact that she lives in constant war.

Another factor to take into account while analysing the behaviour and relationships between young adults and their parents is the social context they grow up in. Many of the differences between the characteristics of those in the three different books under analysis might be a fruit of the time they were settled in. As we all know, the temporal gap between *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Book Thief* and *The Fault in Our Stars* is quite big. That difference would involve a change in the behaviour, social values and the ways to raise children. In today's society those are deeply influenced by the television and other forms of mass media which is what happens to Hazel Grace. According to Semizu, that makes wonderment redundant and diminishes the experience and quality of childhood itself (Semizu, 2013). Nevertheless, Holden Caulfield's identity was not affected by the same variables and that is where many differences come from. Neil Postman has an interesting point of view on that phenomenon. He warns in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (2001) that childhood is disappearing from modern society. In his view, part of the distinction between adults and children is that adults are more literate. He argues that "the Literate Man" is a product of the invention of the printing press with movable type in the middle of the fifteenth century, and "in his coming the Literate Man left behind the children" (Postman, 1982). Therefore those became "unformed adults" (Postman, 1982). Finally, in *The Book Thief*'s case, values such as the love for your family and the respect for your elders were even more different than between the other two books, and they were also blurred by the presence of the Second World War and the cruelty of Nazism.

In the case of the family in *The Book Thief*, we have the extraordinary situation of war. It is far from being a good time and place to raise a child, and the fact that Liesel's biological parents died makes it even worse. According to a study performed by Michelle Stone and Anat Shoshani (2008, pp.348-358) which examined the role of parenting styles and parental warmth in moderating relations between exposure to political life events and mental health symptoms, children who grow up during war, armed conflict and terrorism experience dangerous events that threaten their mental health and normative age-related transitions. Growing up in these unstable and perilous environments is associated with psychological difficulties both among children and

adolescents. This research tells us that the situation that Liesel Meminger is in can be very negative for her psychological development. Nevertheless, the results for her are different from the ones of the other two characters under analysis. The parental role in the face of Hans Hubermann achieves better results than the ones expected. This phenomenon can be explained by psychology. According to Bonanno, the wide individual differences shown in adjustment to these conditions are indicative of the many vulnerability and resilience factors that influence outcomes (Bonanno, 2015, pp. 139-169). Numerous factors have been studied as possible risk or resilience moderating factors ranging, from children's personal features and temperament to family and environmental characteristics ([Slone and Shoshani, 2006](#)). Despite the plausible role of parenting style in children's adjustment to traumatic experiences ([Baumrind, 1995](#); [Steinberg, 2001](#)), this aspect has been scarcely studied in the context of armed conflict and war. In view of this, the study of Baumrind and Steinberg previously mentioned, examined the moderating function of parenting style and parental warmth on the effects of children's exposure to armed conflict and war. In other words, the parental figure can be a factor that helps in the moderation of the effects that war has over the child, which is what happens in the case of the protagonist. The care and love of her foster father is making her regenerate and overcome the traumatic events she lived,

Despite the huge differences between all the characters and their families, we could argue that parent roles are decisive in the creation of young adults' behaviour and identity. Both the presence and absence of a parental figure shapes the personality of an adolescent in a very conditioning way. We could also state that the extreme cases are not positive for the child's development, that is, the excessive or not sufficient parent involvement in the young adult's life could be harmful. According to some psychologists that we mention above, like Shoshani and Slone, it could affect negatively the children's social-emotional adjustment and adult mental health. Hazel Grace's behaviour is shaped from the relationship she has with her parents and especially her mother. The issue appears with the fact that she tends to be too protective with her daughter, causing harm to the development of her identity by not letting her experience life on her own. In contrast, Holden Caulfield does not receive almost any attention from his parental figures, so he is forced to discover and grow on his own. An example of that is the school he studies in, which is far away from his home and the fact that his parents never visit him. Naturally, trying to explore life and the world on your own at

such a young age can be extremely difficult and could lead to problems in your personality. As to Liesel Meminger, she will always be a mystery. Her behaviour and personal growth reached such unexpected limits for a child living in her circumstances. In conclusion, all the authors of the novels under analysis had the aim to expose harmful parental behaviours in their literature, in order to make both parents and children more aware of the problems that can be caused by those and to offer suitable solutions. We have examined those positive and negative influences by the parents to the young adults, and pointed out the consequences they had on each of the characters we analysed. We arrived to the conclusion that the excessive parental presence in a young adult's life is as bad as the lack of one, and that no matter how bad the circumstances, with the help of our family and our loved ones we can take something positive out of it. What we should all bear in mind is what Justin Trudeau once said: "Parents are the centre of a person's solar system, even as an adult. My dad had a stronger gravitational pull than most, so his absence was bound to leave a deep and lasting void". (Trudeau, 2017)



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